

Luke 17:11-19

Almost everyone in America is religious on Thanksgiving Day. Not because they go to church to worship the Triune God. For most, the sacred meal of turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pie is devoured, and after dinner the football game is turned on. For many families, this tradition has been honored for generations, and Americans observe it with religious fanaticism. They would sooner switch churches than switch from turkey to ham on Thanksgiving Day.

For some reason, in America we think that Thanksgiving Day is the time of the year to be thankful. You can be an ingrate eleven months out of the year, but when the fourth Thursday in November comes around, you're always reminded to be thankful. Even the football announcers and players with their families tell you from the television screen that we have a lot to be thankful for. And I suppose they're right. But that's not why we're here tonight. We don't need to come to church to tell God that we're thankful. We'll pray before we eat dinner tomorrow. That should suffice. The church did not set aside this day as a day to thank God for His blessings. Our country did. Thanksgiving Day is not a Church festival. It's a secular holiday.

So why are we here? For the same reason the Samaritan leper returned. He may have come back thanking Jesus for healing him, but Jesus didn't need his thanks. The other nine lepers were just as thankful. They surely offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving at their local tabernacle, and included a petition thanking God in their prayers later that evening. They were thankful, but they did not return to Jesus.

Being thankful does not make you a Christian. Thankfulness and faith are not the same thing. Unbelievers gather with their families for Thanksgiving Day just as believers do. They may have an attitude of thankfulness the same as, or even more than Christians have. Muslims thank their god; so do Mormons, Hindus, and Buddhists. Thankfulness is not faith in the true God.

All ten lepers had thankfulness, but only one had faith. He returned to Jesus not so much to thank Him, as to be with Him. The sinner was coming to his Savior. The lost sheep was returning to the Good Shepherd. The man who had received healing for his flesh was seeking healing for his soul. That's why he came back. He returned to Jesus in order to worship Him.

The other nine gave the standard answer that we hear so often today: I don't need to go to Jesus in order to worship Him...I can worship Him wherever I am. That's why they went their separate ways. But worship is not the same thing as thanking and praising God. Worship is, first and foremost, receiving from God His divine blessings. The Samaritan leper wasn't satisfied with his cure of leprosy. He wanted more. Not more for his body... more for his eternal soul. He believed Jesus was his Savior, and he wanted the forgiveness and life which only He gives.

That's why we are here tonight. Sure we sing hymns of thanks to God. We come with a thankful attitude. But it's all a clever deception by God. He blesses you with all that you need for this life so that you come to worship Him, not so He can bask in your thanks, but so He can give you more of what you need for your eternal soul.

You can never have too much grace; too much forgiveness; too much salvation. It's not like turkey. It cannot be overused. You cannot study the Bible too much. You cannot receive too much of Christ in Holy Communion. It never becomes old or boring, unless it is not really believed; unless, like the nine, we think we've had enough and go our way. The Samaritan leper returned to Jesus because he had faith, and having faith he wanted more of God's grace. Faith goes where Jesus is. Faith feeds upon His words. Faith is nourished by His Supper. Faith never tells Jesus, "See ya." Faith, again and again, draws us to Him.

And thus it is that you are here tonight. We are not here merely to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. Instead, we are here to give thanks in the Christian way—not by giving, but by receiving. Receiving grace upon grace from our gracious God. Receiving life and salvation from Him who died to free you from your sins. It's yours...today! Because Jesus is here for you, all of you Samaritan lepers are given His divine blessings. You are forgiven. You are redeemed. Eternal life is yours in Christ. And for this we thank Him. Not because He needs it, but that through your thanksgiving He will keep drawing you to Him, always to give you more. Amen.